

Francis Perkins
Address at the 50th Anniversary Memorial of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire
March 25, 1961

“...Out of that terrible episode came a self-examination of stricken conscience in which the people of this state saw for the first time the individual worth of each of those 146 people who fell or were burned in that great fire. And we saw too, the great human value of every individual who was injured in an accident by a machine.

There was a stricken conscience of public guilt and we all felt that we had been wrong, that something was wrong with that building which we had accepted or the tragedy never would have happened. Moved by this sense of stricken guilt, we banded ourselves together to find a way by law to prevent this kind of disaster.

And so it was that the Factory Commission that sprang out of the ashes of the tragedy made an investigation that took four years of searching, of public hearings, of legislative formulations of pressuring through the legislature the greatest battery of bills to prevent disasters and hardships affecting working people, of passing laws the like of which have never been seen in any four sessions of any state legislature.

It was the beginning of a new and important drive to bring the humanities to the life of the brothers and sisters we all had in the working groups of the United States. The stirring up of the public conscience and the act of the people in penitence brought about not only these laws; it was also the stirring of conscience which brought about in 1932 the introduction of a new element into the life of the whole United States.

We had in the election of Franklin Roosevelt the beginning of what has come to be called a New Deal for the U.S.... But it was based really upon the experience that we had in New York and upon the sacrifices of those who, we faithfully remember with affection and respect, died in that terrible fire on March 25, 1911. They did not die in vain...”

Cited in The Triangle Fire by Leon Stein, 1977.